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## Which Way in '08?

*By Jason Wilson, Axel Bruns, Barry Saunders*

The blogosphere and online independent media certainly proved themselves capable of offering an outstanding alternative narrative of last year's federal election. In several pieces during the campaign, we pointed out how the bloggers had led the way in offering participatory election coverage, and how organs like [Crikey](#) and [New Matilda](#) had managed to present a refreshing range of opinion that differed from the usual suspects in the MSM.

Now that the hoopla and buzz of the big event has died down, though, where to from here? Can the momentum be sustained during the fallow period between elections, and where the end of the Howard Government means that there is suddenly a lot less at stake in politics for a largely left-leaning, opinion-driven media space? And can such outlets move beyond opinion and start generating something like original news?

For the most part, those bloggers with specialist interests beyond national politics have been the ones who have maintained momentum throughout the long summer following the election.

Economists have had a lot to chew over following international market turmoil, so bloggers like [John Quiggin](#) have been able to take readers through the ins and outs of financial meltdown.

Sadly, problems in the Middle East never seem to go away, so [Antony Loewenstein](#) has had a lot to get on with too.

Those bloggers who have anything to say about Queensland conservative politics (like Graham Young at [Ambit Gambit](#)) or who have an interest in the US primaries (like the libertarians at [Catalaxy](#) who are following the Ron Paul phenomenon) have had no shortage of drama (and unintentional comedy) to analyse.

The psephologists – like [Possum](#), [William Bowe](#) and [Simon Jackman](#) – who had such a stellar election campaign – have all found a variety of things to talk about, too.

Possum has revealed a nice line in trenchant opinion blogging, covering everything from the prospects of Brendan Nelson to cricket's sledging controversy. This hasn't stopped him generating more statistical insights in the election wash-up. *Poll Bludger's* long-standing commitment to covering all elections has meant that he's been able to take on the by-elections and long-running counts in the aftermath of the election. Simon Jackman has written about the US race, and has himself exhibited the statistician's natural love of cricket in a few posts.

Besides their diversity of interests, the psephologists' advantage over some other public affairs bloggers is perhaps their capacity to generate new information, whether that's revisiting the election results with new analytical tools, or [using statistical methods to consider the prospective merger of the conservative parties](#). They can develop talking points in ways that don't necessarily depend on the agenda of the mainstream media, or which inflect that agenda in original ways.

Problems may arise, however, for those bloggers who have simply been presenting a left of centre viewpoint in answer to the Howard ascendancy, and in criticising what Paul Keating (in last week's memorable spray) called the "Praetorian guard" of right wing journalists on the MSM opinion pages.

With the Rudd Government in place, and the hard-right columnists looking increasingly isolated (Tom Switzer's resignation as the editor of the *Oz's* opinion pages last week is a clear sign here), what's left for the left to put to rights?

Some have been hard at work keeping the Rudd government on their toes, with [Tim Dunlop](#) criticising the social conservatism of the Attorney-General and [Anonymous Lefty](#) launching his

usual broadsides. [Tim Blair](#) is still fighting from the right [despite recovering from abdominal cancer](#).

### **'Product Differentiation'**

Although the accusation that the blogosphere "doesn't break stories" and is parasitic on the mainstream media is a cliché, it carries an element of truth. Unless bloggers can add value in their commentary, and unless there is some clear "product differentiation" between that commentary and what's on offer in the more prominent forums, they may struggle to retain the readership they developed during the campaign.

It may be that some opinion bloggers are able to parlay their prominence into a mainstream media career, and it's certainly been suggested, in reaction to events like *The Bulletin's* closure, that an infusion of blogosphere-derived voices could enliven moribund mainstream forums. But it's possible to wonder, in a media world that's saturated with opinion, whether the blogosphere might more generally develop strategies that make it more than just a stepping-stone to MSM gigs for a selected few.

One answer, perhaps, is provided by the psephs, and it may also help us account for their stunning popularity during the election: the development of specialisms in the blogosphere.

Experiments in beatblogging are starting to show that it's much more productive and sustainable to encourage specialists in the acquisition of journalistic ability, so that they can share their insights with a broad readership, than it is to persuade mainstream journalists to acquire in-depth specialist knowledge which may remain underutilised in their day-to-day work.

The wider blogosphere as a mere reservoir of alternative generalist opinion that fluctuates with the political cycle may be useful and important on occasion, but dedicated expert bloggers (or blogging experts) will always be of value to those interested in their specific field or discipline.

It is, of course, still early days for Australia's bloggers, and it's likely that the generalist sites will continue to prosper at least until the inevitable generational changes in our mainstream media have run their course.

But we'd guess that in a few years' time, it's those bloggers with the ability to clearly represent a particular area of expertise who will have maintained their readership and their influence.

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